The Path Toward Religious and Cultural Inclusivity: The Need for Critical Inquiry

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**Purpose and Value**

The purpose of this proposed thesis is to explore what it means to question and doubt your beliefs, whether religious or cultural, and how this act of critical inquiry contributes to open-mindedness and the ability for fruitful dialogue among religions and cultures. As Catherine Cornille says in her book *The im-possibility of interreligious dialogue*, “The more attached one is to the absolute truth of one’s own religious doctrines and practices, the less inclined one will be to engage the teachings of other religions in a spirit of openness and receptivity” (Cornille, 57).

One of the purposes of this thesis is to research the attitudes of Christianity on interreligious dialogue as compared with Buddhist and Islamic doctrines. By researching interreligious dialogue between Christians and Buddhists, as well as Christians and Muslims, I will explore whether and how each party expresses openness to critical inquiry. This thesis will then explore the role that critical inquiry plays in creating dialogue and whether or not the varying attitudes toward critical inquiry help to facilitate fruitful dialogue.

Due to many connections between religion and culture, the success (or failure) of faiths to promote interreligious dialogue has the potential to influence societal values toward other cultural groups. There is a crucial link between openness to critical inquiry of one’s own faith (an openness to doubt) and the successful outcome of the dialogue – that is, increased understanding and tolerance. Due to this link, openness to critical inquiry on a broadly cultural level will be a necessary component to any future inter-cultural engagements. By investigating the various outcomes of dialogue due to teachings on critical inquiry between Christians and Buddhists and Christians and Muslims, I hope to gain a better understanding on how openness to critical inquiry might have an impact on society’s engagement with other cultures.

The proposed thesis emerges directly from my interdisciplinary major, Religion, Society, and Culture. This major involves Theology, Anthropology, History, Philosophy, and Peace Studies. While Theology and Anthropology act as the two primary fields of study, the subsequent three disciplines are necessary to creating a satisfactory approach to the relationship between religion and culture in society. With this thesis, I will be pulling from all of these disciplines to create a well-rounded approach to what it means to question personal beliefs. This proposed thesis would be an accumulation of what I have learned thus far at the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John’s University. A significant theme from all of the classes I have taken for my major includes understanding the source of personal beliefs— where they come from and why they matter. This thesis would propel me a step further by giving me the opportunity to apply the knowledge I have learned in my studies in research that affects not only a general wide audience of Americans, but the campus I call home as well.

**Outline**

The thesis would begin with explanations of what it means to practice critical inquiry. It would move forward to how the Christian and Buddhist traditions understand openness to doubting beliefs, and how this affects interreligious dialogue. Once this relationship has been appropriately examined, the thesis will investigate the relationship between Christian and Muslim dialogue. After exploring how interreligious dialogue is impacted by attitudes toward critical inquiry, the conversation will progress to investigating how this open dialogue between religions, or lack thereof, impacts the culture in which the religions are practiced. The thesis will end with a defense of the hypothesis that critical inquiry, the position of initial doubt about one’s own religious beliefs, is necessary to enter into interreligious dialogue. This is the necessary dialogue that will engender positive social attitudes toward different cultural groups.

**Summary**

In summary, the proposed thesis seeks to explain the essential practice of critical inquiry. In order to do so, I will explore Christian and Buddhist, as well as Christian and Muslim, attitudes on the subject of critical inquiry and assess how these stances affect their engagement in interreligious dialogue. The proposed thesis will then present the impact a religion has (based on the successfulness of these religious interactions) on a society’s perception of other religious and cultural practices. Overall the thesis argues for more open-minded attitudes and the need for religious and cultural inclusivity by starting with the proposition that practicing critical inquiry is a necessity to moving forward.

**Dissemination Plan**

I plan to submit a version of the thesis to Obsculta, the student journal of theology published by the School of Theology every year. In addition I will participate in the presentation of student theses in the theology department that takes place every December and April as well as on Scholarship and Creativity Day. I will also submit a version of my thesis to the Journal of Integrated Social Sciences (JISS) as well as to the Intermountain West Journal of Religious Studies.

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